

TOPICS OF THE TIME.

The Progressive Discovery of America.

THIS number of THE CENTURY goes to its readers on the first day of the "Columbus year." It is a year which THE CENTURY will commemorate in many ways, one way being a series of articles describing and illustrating the remarkable architectural beauties of the Columbian Exposition at Chicago next year. It is the object of that exposition to celebrate, in a manner worthy of our position and power as a nation, the discovery of this country by Columbus four hundred years ago. Delay in reaching a decision as to a site made necessary a postponement till 1893, but a celebration in that year will be scarcely less appropriate than it would have been in 1892. In fact, it would be appropriate in any year between 1892 and 1898, for discoveries were made almost continuously by Columbus and other navigators between 1492 and 1498, and it was not till the latter year that he set foot upon the soil of the continent of America.

In his first voyage, which began on August 3, 1492, and ended on October 12, Columbus discovered only the Bahama Islands, landing first upon one of them which its Indian inhabitants called Guanahani. For a long time the weight of authority was in favor of San Salvador as being the one which most nearly meets the confusing descriptions which Columbus himself wrote of his landing-place, but the "weight of modern testimony," says Justin Winsor in his latest work, "Christopher Columbus," "seems to favor Watling's Island." Columbus visited several other islands, including Cuba, during this first voyage, discovering among other things that the Indians of Fernandina lived in houses shaped like tents, "with nets extended between the posts, which they called *hamacs*,—a name soon adopted by sailors for swinging beds." The rude cut which Winsor gives of these *hamacs* shows them to be in construction and shape the exact counterpart of the netted hammocks of to-day.

The second voyage of Columbus began on September 25, 1493, and the first land sighted was one of the Caribbee Islands, which he reached on November 3. He landed and named it Dominica. He passed on, discovering other islands in this group, reaching the islands discovered on his first voyage on November 22. He spent a great deal of time in searching for gold, especially for one marvelously rich mine which the Indians always told him was somewhere not far in advance of where he was. He became so eager in the search for this mine that the Indians soon learned to hold up a nugget of gold and exclaim: "Behold the Christians' God!" It was while in the Bahamas on this second voyage that Columbus wrote to his sovereigns in Spain proposing a slave trade in the savages of the New World. He remained in the Bahamas till March 10, 1496, exploring the greater part of the time and discovering additional islands, including Jamaica.

Columbus began his third voyage on May 30, 1498,

and on July 31 he discovered and named Trinidad, landing upon that island and giving it its name because of its triple-peaked mountain which reminded him of the Trinity. He looked across the channel which separates Trinidad from the low country of the South American continent about the mouths of the Orinoco, and supposed the coast which he saw stretching away for twenty leagues to be that of another island. On his two former voyages he had insisted that Cuba was a continent, and not an island. And now when he was for the first time in sight of a continent he supposed it to be an island. He tasted the water which washed the shores of Trinidad, and, though greatly surprised to find it fresh, he did not dream that it was made so by the waters of a mighty river which drained a continent. The precise date on which Columbus first set foot on the continent is not known, but it is believed to have been August 5, 1498. The precise spot is also uncertain, but it is known to have been on the shores of the Gulf of Paria, near some of the many mouths of the Orinoco. After sailing along the coast for several days, he returned to the colony he had founded at Hispaniola, now Hayti, in the Bahamas, remaining there till October, 1500, when he was sent back to Spain a prisoner in irons.

On his fourth voyage, which began May 9 or 11, 1502, Columbus discovered the island of Martinique, and sailed across the Caribbean Sea to the coast of Honduras, landing near the cape of Honduras on August 17. He then sailed along the coast of Costa Rica and the Isthmus of Panama, till December 2, when he turned backward and set sail for Hispaniola. On November 7, 1504, he returned for the last time to Spain, and his discoveries were at an end.

He had discovered the continents of Central and South America, but had not set foot or eye on the continent of North America. He died in ignorance of the fact that he had discovered a new world, adhering to the last to his theory that the lands and countries he had found belonged to that part of Eastern Asia which the ancients called India.

A year before Columbus discovered the South American continent John Cabot discovered the island of Newfoundland, and sailing through the strait of Belle Isle coasted along the shores of the North American continent. It was held for many years that he sailed as far south as Florida, but this is now considered to be very doubtful. At all events, it is conceded that in June, 1497, he saw some portion of the North American continent, but he, like Columbus, had no idea that he had found a new world, merely supposing the land he saw to be an extended peninsula of Europe, infolding the North Atlantic.

Americus Vesputius is claimed to have discovered the continent of South America in 1497, while Columbus was making ready for his third voyage, and this claim has long vexed historians, who are still divided in opinion about it, though the weight of opinion is

against it. But while Columbus was bending all his mental energies to making his discoveries harmonize with his theory that the lands he had found belonged to India or Eastern Asia, Vespuccius published a clear and graphic description of the new lands he or Columbus had found, giving to them for the first time the name of *Mundus Novus*, New World. This name suited so well the glowing descriptions which Vespuccius wrote, that it took a powerful hold upon the popular imagination, with the result of investing Vespuccius with all the honors of discovery and giving his name to the New World he had pictured in such graphic colors.

Alabama's Thousand-Dollar-a-Day Blunder.

ALABAMA'S experience with banking "in the interests of the people" was in some respects similar to that of Michigan with "Wild-cat" banks, described in the November CENTURY. Like that of many other States at about the same period, it resulted in complete collapse, with great financial loss to the people whom it was designed to benefit, a serious impairment of the State's credit, a flood of public scandal, and a heavy burden of debt. The history of Alabama's blunder is so full of instruction for those who believe in State or national agency for making everybody prosperous by means of liberal banking and cheap money, that we shall set it forth in some detail.

Alabama went into the banking business as a State in 1823, when its legislature passed an act for the establishment of the Bank of the State of Alabama, the capital, which was not limited to any amount, to be furnished entirely by the State. The management of the bank was intrusted to a president and twelve directors, who were to be chosen annually by joint vote of the legislature. The only limit put to the volume of notes which the bank should issue was that they should be in such sums as the president and directors might deem "most expedient and safe." Certain public funds were set aside to constitute part of the capital of the bank, and in addition the State was authorized to issue State stock to the amount of \$100,000, redeemable within ten years, and bearing interest not exceeding 6 per cent. The bank began business in 1825. Three years later it was authorized to issue \$100,000 more of State stock, redeemable in twenty years, at a rate of interest not exceeding 6 per cent. In the same year other public funds, aggregating \$1,300,000, were added to the capital. Five years later about \$500,000 of State University funds were transferred to the bank as capital. Between 1832 and 1835 four branches of the State Bank were established in as many cities, and State bonds to the amount of \$6,300,000 were issued to supply them with capital.

The design of the founders of the system was to distribute the bank money as evenly as possible among the people of the State, and with this end in view the original act stipulated that the money loaned by the bank should be apportioned among the several counties of the State according to their representation in the legislature. At first no limit appears to have been placed to the amounts of a bank's money which its president and directors could themselves borrow. The result was that they borrowed as much as they wished and loaned it to their friends on such security as seemed satisfactory to themselves.

The choice of president and directors by the legislature, designed to give the people control of the bank's management, led to gross corruption and abuse, being aided greatly in these directions by the requirement for equal distribution of loans throughout the State and by the lack of any limit upon the sums which the president and directors could borrow. When the several branches had been established, each with its president and directors, there were annually to be chosen by the legislature between sixty and seventy directors. In their campaigns for election to the legislature, candidates would point to the requirement for the equal distribution of loans among the people, and promise each one of their supporters a loan in case of election. Before members who had been elected after such pledges, the candidates for bank directors had to go for election. Mr. J. H. Fitts, of Tuscaloosa,—to whose valuable paper upon the history of the State bank and its branches, read by him before the Alabama Bankers' Association in June, 1891, we are indebted for most of the information in this article,—says the number of candidates for directors was usually two or three times as great as the number of places to be filled, adding: "For, it must be remembered, the office of bank director, without salary or any emolument whatever, was regarded by many as the most lucrative office in the State. The legislature was annually beset by a horde of greedy adventurers, who were candidates for bank directors, and who resorted to all kinds of electioneering tricks and promises to secure their election. Unfortunately for the banks, the votes of too many members of the legislature were controlled by the liberality of candidates in promising bank discounts to them and their friends." Mr. J. W. Garrett, in his "Reminiscences of Public Men in Alabama," gives an amusing incident illustrating this abuse. A member of one branch of the legislature died while a campaign for the election of bank directors was in progress, and all his fellow members wore the usual badge of crape on the arm for thirty days. A shrewd countryman from a remote county, who was on a visit to the State capitol, noticing that all the men with crape were the recipients of "treats" of all kinds, including cigars and suppers galore, put a similar badge upon his own arm and had a royal good time for several days before the imposture was discovered.

Mr. Fitts relates that one of the hotel-keepers of Tuscaloosa succeeded in getting himself elected a bank director in 1832. "The increased patronage of his hotel was wonderful; many members of the legislature and a great majority of the persons who visited Tuscaloosa to borrow money stopped at his hotel with the view of securing the influence of the proprietor with the Board of Directors, which passed upon all applications for money." Four other hotel-keepers in the same city, realizing that there was no other way in which to compete with such attractions, became candidates, and in 1834 they were all elected. On one occasion, when the five hotel-keepers constituted a majority of the Board of Directors, and had discounted a great many notes and bills, each note or bill receiving the ardent advocacy of one of the hotel-keepers and the votes of all five, a note was passed around which received nobody's support, and was about to be rejected, when the president, who was not in sympathy with the majority, remarked quietly of the signer of the note: "This man must have camped out last night."